Greetings
Glad to return Rev V's favors
Can't stay afterwards

Today is Reformation Sunday. 446 years ago an insignificant Roman Catholic monk, in the relatively insignificant German University town of Wittneburg walked inconspicuously to the village Church and nailed to the large oaken doors a manuscript. It was no great thing he had done. Early wood cuts of theevents show the usual crowd of villagers milling about the church steps; seemingly unaware of the monk. the act in itself had no special significance. It was the practice of the day for scholars at the University to present their ideas in this manner. Anyone who was interested could read the manuscripts, and if there was disagreement a public academic debate would ensue.

It wasn't long, however, until the 95 theses of brother Matin were read by the right men and recognized as containing thoughts and ideas that could become grave heresy against the Roman Church. Soon the figure of a humble monk nailing his theses to the door became the picture of a man called of God, standing at the very foundations of the miedeval church and shaking for all he was worth.

Our time today could easily be spent retelling the dramatic and interesting story of Martin Luther. But I feel that there is more to say--more to think about on Reformation Sunday--than the biography of the man who started it all. In fact, I have the feeling, that to make too much of Martin Luther and the Reformation of the 16th century, is to betray the nature of the Reformed church. The Reformation made a clean break with the past; to do nothing but revere the past on Reformation Sunday is perhaps the least appropriate thing we could do.

In the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, we hear our Lord speaking words that very well might be the theme of the 20th century church of the Reformation. ("No one puts a piece of unshrunk clothon an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is,the skins burs$, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wine skins, and so both are preserved.")

At the time this saying embodied many of the same thoughts that were the motivating power of the Reformation. A piece of unshrunk cloth, used as a patch on an old garment, would shrink the next time the garment was washed, thus putting a disastrous strain on the old fibers. No one would bottle new wine while it was still fermenting; but even after bottling some fermentation is bound to occur, and only elastic, new skins could stand the pressure. Jesus was talking about Judaism when he used the image of an old garment, and old wineskins. It was a reference to the sprawling, legalistic, structure that the faith of Israel had become in the first century. He referred to a rigid religious system of priets, pharisees, scribes and laws; a system that would not--and could not change. The old was not capable of containing the new. Jesus Christ called men into a new relationship with God and with each other. He announced that, in him, a new kingdom--a new era in God's history of redemption, had been ushered in. He called men to a new response; he demanded that they do things unheard of to the legalistic Jew. He demanded sacrifice and love of enemy, and unlimited forgiveness, and selfless dedication; and he knew--as those about him, did not--that these responses-this new faith--could not become just an addition to Judaism. To superimpose the new on the old would be disastrous for both; like putting new wine in an old skin--it simply wouldn't work. The old traditions of Judaism could not be stretched to contain the new gospel of the new Kingdom.

And so, from the very beginning, the Christian faith, in a sense, has been anti-traditional untraditional. One of the keynotes of the Faith begun with the appearance of Jesus Christ, was its shattering newness. His presence was new; he said and did new things; he called people to a new response; he called them into a new community-- a new Israel--that soon came to be known as the church.

The keynote of newness followed the church for the first one hundred years. In one hundred different locations, men heard the gospel of Jesus Christ--and having heard, devised new ways of response. In 1,000 different cities, towns and villages, new Christians had to discover brand new ways of being the church. Each was different; as each local situation differed--so did the way the early Christians went about being the Church of Christ. If you

will escuse the borrowed and well worn cliche--it was truly a new frontier; the only guide was God/s Holy Spirit--the only tradition--the presence of the living Christ and his earthly example.

Sadly and unfortunately this refreshing newness was quickly dissipated and exhausted. A short 100 years after the ministry of Jesus Christ--his new community of believers had begun the trek down the same old path of traditionalism. With the emerging of Rome as the captial of the gretest empire the world had ever known; the church in that city began to assume undue importance. A hierarchy of church officers was in the making; and it followed logically that chief among the chiefs was the Bishop of Rome. Power was centralized, traditions were established, preserved and soon revered and adored; the newness of Christianity was forgotten; the new covenant community, the new Israel, began to be more and more like the old garment of Judaism; a sprawling, legaslistic power structure--that knew nothing of the newness of Christ--but only of preserving its own existence. For 1,000 dark years the church of Jesus Christ did not change; in a short period of time it was transformed from a community of believers, on fire because of their newly found faith, into a stagnant, creaky institution that thrived on repressing anything and everything new.

A subtle change had occurred to the Christian Faith. At first the church was men's way of responding; having heard and believed they went out and became the community of God. But over the centuries of entombment in the Roman Church the gospel lost its identity; in fact over the centures, the gospel was absorbed by the traditions and structure of the church; and to be a Christian no longer meant discipleship--with Christ as master; but membership with the Pope as the Christ's vicar. A subtle change, stretched over 15 centuries; but one that sti plagues the church in all its forms.

The middle ages saw the birth of the Enlightenement, the Renaasaince and the Reformation. Newness was in the air as humanity awakened from its 1,000 year sleep and set out in new directions. Art, literature, science, medicines, philosophy--were reborn and expressed the new found freedom by striking out on unexplored paths. The Reformation was part of this great movement. It caught the fresh msell of newness; it awakened the spirit of man to the

newness of the gospel--and for a moment in history men allowed Jesus Christ to confront them anew; they allowed the newness of the gospel to call them into a new faith. And there was born, slowly and painfully a new church. This was a church that could and would change: a church unafraid of the unknown challenges of the future; a church thatoutrightly denied the authority of tradition and put its whole faith in the guidance of God--as he speaks through the Bible.

The Reformation, then, was an attitude; a moving of the Spirit--and a new answer--a new response. It was a calling to new witness and new service. As such, we Protestants of th20th century. should not say we are of the Reformed Faith--but of the reforming faith. For the Reformation, once begun-- could ~~ord~~ never end. Once men realized that in every age, in every decade and every year, God calls men into a new relationship with him and demands that they respond in new ways--a process, or way of thinking was initiated that could not cease. When it ceased; when the church ceased being a reforming church--it could no longer claim to be the child of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Reformation.

As you know, however, medieval Christians proved that they were no different from 4th century Christians--and little different from 1st cent. Jews. The Church of the Reformation put its roots down in the new cultures of Germany, France, Holland, England, Scotland and the new world beyond the sea. It cultivated a new crop of traditions and rigid structures that solidified and proven impermiable to change. In short the Protestant church wasn't long in sloughing off the freedom of the Reformation; it wasn't long in relinquishing its very nature as a "reforming church."

To quickly bring us up to date, I believe it can be fairly said that today we still forget the keynote of newness. Today we have our traditions; we pour the new wine into the same old skin--and more often than not it spills all over the ground.

We sing "Give me that Old Time Religion"; we sentimentlize that "church isn't what it used to be" and what we are really saying is; "we want no part of a reforming church'. we want no part of a new community-- a new witness a new church." The old was good enough for Mos etc. etc. it's good enough for me." Well, it might be good enough for us--but it wasn't

good enough for Martin Luther and be assured that it wasn't, and isn't good enough for Jesus Christ!" If you pour new wine into old wineskins, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed.

We live in an age of rapid change. Changes press in upon us every day. Old traditions, old conceptions are shattered with gleeful abandon. The church reformed itself druing the great awakening of the Renaisance. But in our age; in the past 50 years we have experienced more change than occurred in the previous 5,000. James Russel Lowell said; "Time makes ancient good uncouth." His wise words ought to thrust us face to face with the brutal reality; that what was appropriate 50 years ago is no longer appropriate today; that especially in the church of Jesus Christ--what was an effective witness in the 19th century is possibly totally ireelevant today.

Our age makes stringent demands on the church of Jesus Christ. It is an age of the industrial giant, the suburban exodus, the lonely crowd, the status seeker. It is the age of millionaries, and hopeless slums; the age of American democracy and inhuman discrimination. We live in the age of the United Nations--and the threat of nuclear war. We live in what has been called the age of fear--the age of anxiety, the angry and beat generation--the age of man's inhumanity to man. This is life today. These are all words and concepts that are part and parcel of the new age--they are the world; the world the church of Jesus Christ has been called upon to heal and serve and redeem.

But by and large the church has backed off the uncomfortable crisses of modern life--and retreated to its soothing traditions of yesteryear. Like the church of the 13th cent. mano we stand, figuratively if not physically, outside of the village proper, away from the busy heart beat of life. The church today, and Christians today, make a virtue of staying clean--of not getting involved int the nastiness of the world. And the church, all too frequently, has become--in the stinging words of one critic "the soldier of Christ, lounging in a stained glass U.S.O., watching the battle rage in the streets."

In the 43 chapter of Isaiah we hear the stirring words recorded by the prophet, "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God is calling his chur today--to be a new thing; God is constantly at work in his church; pushing men out the front door and into the streets, to be the church in new and more effective ways. Jesus Christ confronts men anew in every age--and demands that they get involved in the world: in his world; and there, not here, be the kind of disciple the world so desparately needs.

A nuclear war cannot be fought with bows and arrows; and neither can Christ's mission of redeemption be carried on today using traditions that were born 100 yrs. ago.

The Christian faith never changes; the message of salvation and love that our Lord taught his band of disciples is the same today, yesterday, tomorrow and forever. Martin Luther poured out his soul in the hymn "A mighty Fortress is our God--A bulwark never failing." But our response to that message--to that mighty fortress--can never solidify; it must be ready to change course--and meet the challenges of the new world--regardless of the direction they would take us--with open and loving arms. Today we celebrate the Reformation; but let us celebrate in mind and spirit; by affirming that it is a process never ending; that we, Christians in great, new world--are brothers in a faith, constantly reforming -- never failing.

Amen